

EYE ON OLYMPIA: Gov. Inslee draws a line in the sand over legislators' state budget impasse

By James Casey
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OLYMPIA — Washington's capital in 2015 has lots in common with Chicago during the Civil War.

That's where and when a Union prison camp commandant who had no materials to enlarge his stockade scratched a line in the dirt around his Confederate prisoners.

If they stepped over it, he said, they'd be shot. Period. No warning would be given; no questions would be asked.

That was the original “deadline.”

Now one looms in 10 days for the Legislature to send a budget to Gov. Jay Inslee and avoid a state government shutdown.

Think of lawmakers as those prisoners and Gov. Jay Inslee as the commandant. He's not about to shoot them, of course, but he's loath to let them leave.

Hopes were high two weeks ago that minority Democrats in the GOP-led Senate, and minority Republicans in the Democrat-dominated House had wrangled out a compromise that their respective majority leaders hadn't reached in one regular session and two overtime periods.

Inslee proclaimed a breakthrough, but Republican senators said, “Not so fast.”

Today, according to Sen. Jim Hargrove of Hoquiam, the opposing parties may be able to meet, if not in the middle then near it.

Hargrove and state Reps. Steve Tharinger and Kevin Van De Wege, both of Sequim, represent the 24th Legislative District that includes all of Clallam and Jefferson counties and almost all of Grays Harbor County. All are Democrats.

“I don't know exactly what the outcome will be,” Hargrove told Peninsula Daily News on Saturday.

“[Today], hopefully, we will know more about how to close the last little gap here.”

Closure will include Democrats' abandoning their call for a state capital gains tax and Republicans closing what Hargrove called tax loopholes.

Meanwhile, Inslee held a press conference in which he said much the same thing, saying it all seemed familiar.

“You know what?” he asked reporters. “This is similar to what we all agreed to do in 2013. There was bipartisan compromise then to close some loopholes, invest in education, balance the budget and avoid a government shutdown.

“There is no reason — zero — why we can't have a budget done in one week.”

Without a budget, some government services such as parks will shut down July 1.

Local programs that operate on state grants will go into abeyance until Inslee signs a spending outlay.

State officials sent notices last week to county administrators that county employees on state contracts could be impacted.

That would result in various services — especially those related to health and human services — being temporarily discontinued in Clallam and Jefferson counties.

On Friday, Inslee said, “35,000 parents across Washington in job training programs are being notified that there won't be daycare for their children in 11 days.

“On Tuesday, about 25,000 state workers in communities all across Washington will get a temporary lay-off notice. . . .

“We need to get this done. And we need to do it soon.”

That sounded pretty good to Hargrove — even if the initial outcome doesn't satisfy justices of the state Supreme Court, who have threatened legislators with contempt sanctions if they do not reform public school funding.

“Let's just agree here and come up with a reasonable compromise and get things done,” Hargrove said.

Still, the senator who has seen most budget negotiations go into overtime said he couldn't help but wonder:

“What would we do without deadlines?”

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